

SPOTLIGHT ON REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION (RA) LETTERS

When drafting a note or certification to support an RA request at home or work, a provider should:



Be Truthful and Persuasive:

Focus on “need” and “nexus” (e.g., the connection between the medical condition and the housing or employment need).

Disability + Need + Nexus between them = persuasive RA request

Example: “My patient’s disability makes stairs dangerous for her. Please transfer her to the 1st floor or an elevator building so she will not have to take stairs.”

Doctor:

What if I do not feel comfortable writing the letter as requested by my patient?

A provider may be asked to supply a letter that they do not feel comfortable writing. *Example:* A parent may ask for documentation of a medical condition (e.g., asthma) that the provider does not feel is affected by a particular housing condition (e.g., two teenagers sharing one bedroom). While the parent understandably may want a larger apartment to reduce typical conflict between her teenagers, there is no “nexus” between the disability (asthma) and the request. An unnecessary provider letter can harm a patient’s application and the provider’s reputation and credibility. In such situations, thoughtful providers will explain to the patient that they must avoid “crying wolf” in order for future letters to be effective and they will not write a letter if it is not medically appropriate. Refocus on other productive responses to the problem (e.g., referral to family counseling).

Beware TMI (Too Much Information):

Too much detail can be confusing to a non-medical reader.



Also, be careful of patient’s privacy. *Example: Do not say “HIV positive” or “cancer treatment” if you can say “immunosuppressed” instead.*



Beware TLI (Too Little Information):

Be specific. Vague responses may be misinterpreted.

Example: Do not say “allergen,” say “dust mites and mouse droppings.”

Be sure to explain why the reasonable accommodation is **necessary**, not just “good,” “nice,” or “ideal” – otherwise the application may be denied.

Other Key Tips for Providers

Information Sharing

- Limit disclosure of medical (or personal) information to what is necessary. Unless you have the patient’s written permission to do so, do not provide any medical records (hard copies or electronic) or communicate with the employer/landlord/government agency.
- Someone may request clarification about your statements on the documents; do not hesitate to provide appropriate clarification with the patient’s permission, but do not disclose extra unnecessary details.

Timeliness

- Return any written documentation you have been asked to provide on time. The law imposes deadlines, and missing them can deprive patients of a range of health-promoting supports.

Monitoring Outcomes

- Follow up with the patient about whether their application, supported by your letter, was successful. You can learn from mistakes and develop best practices.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Disability Law Center

www.dlc-ma.org • (800) 872-9992

Massachusetts Office on Disability

www.mass.gov/mod • (617) 727-7440

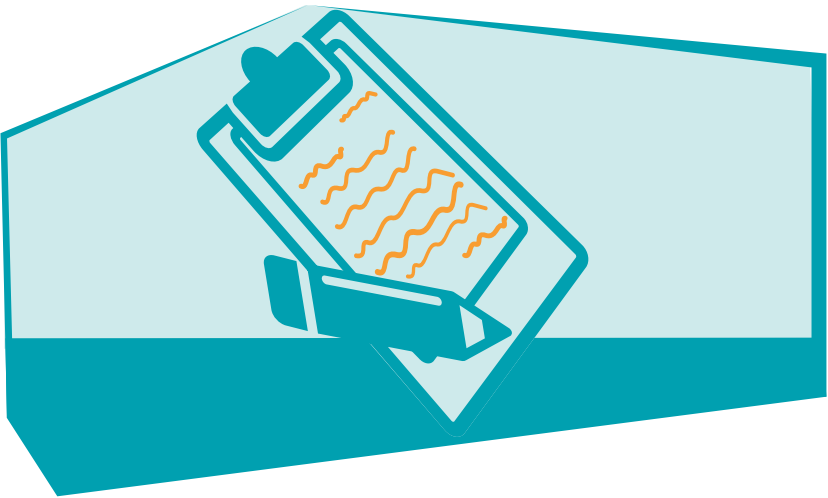
Boston Public Health Commission: Board of Health

<http://www.bphc.org/boardofhealth> • (617) 534-5395

Responding to Requests for Medical Certifications and Doctor’s Notes: What’s the Deal?



An *It Takes Two* Guide for Patients and Providers



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Designed by Artists for Humanity

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Parent*:

I think our apartment is making my son's asthma worse. A leak from our bathroom sink goes into his bedroom. The water is causing mold and rotting the window frame, so more dust is getting in. Can you give me a doctor's note requiring my landlord to fix these problems?



1

Doctor:

Housing conditions definitely affect a person's health. Tell me more about your concerns.



2

Parent:

I tried talking to my landlord, but she said that I should not complain since my rent is low and that I have to fix it myself. She also wants to lay down new carpet in my son's room, which will make his asthma even worse.



Doctor:

You have rights in this situation, and there are government resources - like your Board of Health - to help you fix these problems. It may help too, if I write your landlord asking that she address these concerns promptly, as a reasonable accommodation for your son's disability.



Healthcare Letterhead

Date

Dear Landlord:

Billy the Kid has been a patient of mine for several years and I am working closely with his mother to manage the symptoms of a disability he has. The disability affects his breathing and it gets much worse when he is exposed to mold, dust mites, and pollen. Therefore, provide the following reasonable accommodations:

- 1) Keep the family's unit free from carpeting
- 2) Repair windows that are not weather tight
- 3) Apply weather-stripping around exterior doors
- 4) Repair a plumbing leak that is causing mold

In my medical opinion this is an urgent issue. Thank you for your prompt attention to this important Fair Housing request on behalf of Billy the Kid. If you have any further questions about the connection between his disability and the medically necessary accommodations described above, please let his mother know and I will be happy to provide clarifications.

Sincerely,

[Physician, Physician's Assistant or Nurse Practitioner's name]

[Title]

Why do patients sometimes ask healthcare providers to write a letter or fill out a form that is not a typical prescription?

Eligibility rules governing many health-promoting benefits, services, and legal protections often require that the applicant submit certain documents from a healthcare provider. These eligibility rules are part of federal, state, and local laws and regulations – patients do not make them up. By law, healthcare providers are “gatekeepers” to valuable supports. Common requests include:

- Reasonable accommodation (for housing, employment, etc.)
- Utility shut-off protection
- Special education services
- Disability benefits (SSI, SSDI, long- or short-term insurance, etc.)
- Remediation of poor housing conditions affecting health
- Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) protections
- Certain non-immigrant visa extensions

Sometimes, a patient doesn't want to seem like a “trouble-maker” and it can help for the doctor to be another messenger of the health issues at stake.

When are healthcare providers trained on how to respond to these types of requests?

Actually, clinicians typically do not receive any guidance on this, either during their training or as part of ongoing professional development. Now that the healthcare system is paying more attention to **social determinants of health**, this is an urgent priority!

Why is it critical that providers better understand their role in this context?

- Accessing health-promoting benefits and services can measurably improve a patient's health and well-being. Public policy has positioned healthcare providers as “gatekeepers” to these supports, in many instances, by requiring such certifications/notes to establish eligibility. It is essential that providers comprehend this role.
- Poor communication about a letter request can harm the broader provider-patient relationship. It is critical to have a clear conversation, even if a difficult one.
- Once the landscape of these requests is better understood, a healthcare team can better manage them — from a workflow perspective — across a large patient panel.

Parent:

Is it ok to start with your letter? I don't want to seem like a “trouble-maker.”



3

Doctor:

You are not a troublemaker, you are a good parent. But we can try this letter first. Also, retaliation is illegal.



*We use the word “parent” in this brochure to mean parent, guardian, or caregiver of a child.